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Encountering Place in Education

Chapter 8: Mapping the Importance of Place, Identity and Local Ways of Knowing

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Abstract

This chapter draws on empirical research carried out over a two-year period in a small coastal secondary school in the North of England.

Tracing the trajectory of the academisation project in English schools, the chapter begins with an exploration of the conditions that being subject to a 'forced academy order' brings. Set against a background of policy which, it is argued, privileges the neoliberal ideals of competition and individualism, we see an erasure of space and place as the academy trust, which takes over the school, seeks to both regulate and colonise.

Through the voices of both students and teachers, this chapter develops a counternarrative as it examines the ontological connection to place experienced by the school community. The chapter reflects upon how such a connection to place, a view of 'place as meeting place' and place as political (Massey, 1994; 2005) can inform pedagogy through understanding personal geographies. It is clear that 'places are significant because they are the focus of personal feelings' (Rose, 1995, p.88). It leads to a questioning of whether the English National Curriculum model (DfE, 2013) addresses and enables physical and emotional space for local connections and landscapes to be formed.

It then offers a framework for teachers to harness concepts related to place and 'local ways of knowing' (Walker, 2019) in their own teaching and learning.

Key Words: Place, Identity, Academisation, Personal Geographies, Local.

Introduction

This chapter draws on research carried out in a secondary school located in a coastal town in the North of England. Set in the context of the expansion of the academisation programme in England, the school in question was subject to a forced academy order following a series of Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspections which deemed the school to be 'failing'. Such an order legislates that the school must move from Local Authority control to become an academy, often in England these are part of a group of schools known as multi academy trusts

(MATs). In the narrative fragment, we see a glimpse of a life lived in the school as it was navigating this transition. Conceptually we utilise literature within the field of cultural geographies in order to develop our understanding of the school and the participants as situated within place, space and landscape. This gives much needed context to challenge educational policy and the standardisation agenda at the macro, meso and micro scales and facilitates reflection on how pedagogy itself can attune to local contexts to inform personal geographies and relationality between student and curriculum. This, we argue, develops a critical tool to empower communities to draw on what Walker (2019) terms 'local ways of knowing', in order to develop a counternarrative which challenges the current trajectory that seeks to erase particularity.

Exploring Place, Space and Landscape

Borders and Mapping

The production of geographical knowledge has always involved knowing place and space in particular ways. Historically, importance was placed in technologies which could fix the locations of things in space; locations of places, people and phenomena on the surface of the earth and to represent these on maps. However, what developed was a recognition that there was an association between power, knowledge and geography. This connection between geography and power enabled cartography and mapping to become a means of exerting societal and cultural control upon marginalised communities, creating a notion of 'othering' (Said 1978). Although originally used as a means of exerting colonial power and inscription, it could be argued that the process of bounding has developed into a dynamic phenomenon with the boundary line simply as the 'tangible and visible feature that represents the course and intensity of the bounding process at any particular time and space' (Newman, 2003, p.134).

To deepen our understanding of boundaries requires an exploration of the boundary not only as geographical, but as socially and culturally constructed. Whilst early boundary studies focused on territory and the state (Hartshorne, 1939; Minghi, 1963) more recently the focus has shifted to the notion of 'boundary' as a line which may separate, enclose and potentially exclude at a number of spatial and social scales (Newman, 2003).

Studies emerging in the late 1990s saw a renewed interest in the territorial lines which separate state territories and how these are constantly being redrawn and re-demarcated (Newman, 1999). What was also developing was an interest in the nature of 'bounding', and the way in which people and groups can be enclosed within a variety of social and spatial

compartments (Prescott, 1987). Examining the bounding process requires an integration of the types and scales of boundaries re-conceptualised as a single process. Whilst the study of boundaries is located within separate realms; political, social, geographical, it becomes problematic to understand the phenomenon. What is needed is a way of understanding the processes of 'bounding' and 'bordering' rather than merely seeing the outcome of the various compartmentalised processes.

There is, in addition, the notion of 'borderless'. Thus, we can conceive of a borderless world fuelled by the impact of globalisation. The fact that boundaries have become increasingly permeable in terms of the movement of goods, people and ideas has led some to argue that we have seen the end of absolute territorial integrity and the sovereignty of the state (Albert, 1998; Dittgen, 2000; Kohen, 2000). Political power has moved away from the state towards global and virtual entities.

Place

The ongoing importance of place reflects how fundamental it is to human existence, even existence itself. Acknowledging the importance of place does not shield it from the accusation that it can be seen as a 'fuzzy concept' (Cresswell, 2013, p. 235). The case we make for its centrality to this chapter, demands that we understand the concept of place more clearly, dispelling some of the fuzziness. 'Place' as a concept suffers from several difficulties. It can often be used alongside, or instead of other concepts such as location, locale, region, space, territory and landscape. In addition, it can be used as a more taken-for-granted concept as opposed to a considered one (Cresswell, 2013; 2015).

Massey suggests that very often when we think of what we mean by 'a place' we picture a 'settled community, a locality with a distinct character – physical, economic and cultural' (1995, p. 46) When we reflect on phrases such as 'a sense of place' or 'there is no place like home' or perhaps most revealingly, the phrase 'out of place', we begin to see the power of our conceptualisations of place. Yet for Massey, and central to our conceptual cartography here, is the positioning of space and place with relationality which can help us recognise and harness agentive possibilities. If places may be thought of as 'open articulations of connections' then 'identities of subjects and identities of places constructed through interrelations not only challenge notions of past authenticities but also open the possibility of change in the future' (Massey, 1999a, p. 288). The emphasis on places as sites in the flow of social relations conceives of place as open and unbounded.

Massey's developing thinking that there is a global sense of place sees her conceiving of place as open and porous. They are meeting places where the trajectories of people and ideas collide. One of the effects of modernity has been the establishment of power/ knowledge relations. The colonial power and the colonised spaces, for example, sees a geography of power and a power-geometry of intersecting trajectories (2005, p. 64). Place can be understood as 'woven together out of ongoing stories, as a moment within power-geometrics, as a particular constellation within wider topographies of space' (2005:, p. 131).

Space

Alongside the notion of a physical place is the notion of space in which it is situated. In this chapter we refer to 'place' as the coastal town in which the study took place. In turn we see 'space' as the cultural inscription on place which examines Grosz's (1993) concept of 'social tattooing'.

The move towards a conception of space through social practices shifted the question from 'what is space?' to 'how is it that different human practices create and make use of distinctive conceptualisations of space' (Harvey, 1973: 14). Space, in this sense, is no longer 'a category of fixed and given ontological attributes, but a becoming, an emerging property of social relationships' (Jiménez, 2003, p. 140). This adds a relational dimension which moves space to spatiality.

Massey describes her concern not only with the notion that the term 'space' is adopted with a multiplicity of meanings which are often unexplained. Many authors rely on the terms space or spatial whilst assuming that their meaning is clear and uncontested (1994). Yet her concern extends beyond this to a deeper anxiety that of the many conflicting definitions of space effectively 'de-politicise the realm of the spatial' (ibid, p. 250) and for Massey, who argues for a dynamic and politically progressive way of conceptualising space, this is particularly problematic.

Exploring Landscape

Landscape is a key term of human geography. The constancy of landscape lies in its ability to be a central object of investigation, an organising principle and an interpretive lens. 'Landscape' can be viewed as a site of study in itself, but also as a way of understanding interactions between human cultures and natural environments. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, writing on landscape took a cultural turn. Daniels and Cosgrove (1988) advanced a

definition of landscape as a way of seeing and representing the world. They argued that landscapes worked to reflect and reproduce the values and norms of socio-economic elites. This was developed by Duncan and Duncan (1988) who saw landscape as a signifying system for the production and transmissions of cultural meanings.

Applying psychoanalytic principles to the interpretation of landscape, Rose (1993) argued that the landscape way of seeing was through a masculinist gaze. This added the forms of patriarchy to systems of cultural and political power. Landscape has developed with work which focuses on the phenomenological, corporeal and performative aspects (Mulvey, 1989; Nash, 1996). The natural landscape is a classic foundation for the appreciation of place (Massey, 2005, p. 137). Grounding in the landscape however confers the natural world with a fixity that is challenged. The natural world is continually moving whether this be through erosion or the melting of polar ice. Massey asks, if everything is moving, where is here? (2005, p. 138). 'Here', she argues, is where 'spatial narratives meet up or form configurations, conjunctures of trajectories which have their own temporalities' (ibid, p. 139). Seeing landscape as trajectory, encourages thinking of the totality of the landscape at any particular moment as the 'simultaneity of stories-so-far' (ibid, p.12).

Personal Geographies

The literature around personal geographies informs the conceptual and methodological choices within this chapter. It is inherently linked to the field of children's geographies which Freeman and Tranter (2015, p.491) define as, 'the study of the relationship between children and space'. Children's geographies place students as 'active participants' in their own learning (Hammond and McKendrick, 2020, p. 88). It has been argued that the performativity of English schools has made it challenging to explore personal geographies among our learners (Hammond and McKendrick, 2020). This is in part a reflection and critique of increasingly diverse routes into teaching, 'resulting in teacher educators making decisions to omit areas of knowledge, which they acknowledge to be of value, and which they otherwise would have incorporated in teacher education' (Hammond and McKendrick, 2020, p. 91; GA, 2015; Whiting et al., 2018).The omitting of certain areas or types of knowledge within the curriculum leads to a questioning of how the curriculum is best designed to include the personal geographies and voices of students. According to the Geographical Association (GA, 2023) teachers must ask students geographical questions about issues that are important to them, for example questions around identity and their place in the world. Hammond and McKendrick

(2020) use the GA's curriculum making model in their own research to highlight how student experiences are an essential facet of curriculum development. This supports students in 'meaning making' and contributes to their ability to have a greater understanding of geographical imaginations and concepts (Hammond and McKendrick 2020: 86; Vygotsky 1962; Catling and Martin 2011; Roberts 2017).

This highlights the importance of moving towards schools as 'learning communities' rather than 'learning organisations' (Rudduck, 2004, p.141; Rachal 1998). The ability to adapt the curriculum to include personal geographies is arguably the most effective way to create department and school wide change.

Methodological approach

The methodological underpinnings of the research project we draw on, is one of beginnings and endings. It is one that seeks to tell, listen, understand and observe in a narrative way. This narrative methodology uses storytelling in order to understand the connections between people and places. By using stories, both teller and listener can come together to understand each other within a 'personally sacred realm' (Atkinson, 2012, p. 123). The telling of stories and the urge people have to narrate their lives is nothing new (Atkinson 2012, p.115; Atkinson 1995, 1998; Gubrium and Holstein 1998; Kenyon and Randall 1997; Randall 1995), many well-known figures in society and academia choose to autobiographically produce their life stories (Walker 1984; Massey 1992; Bunkše 2004; Varley 2008). Storytelling as a method then, seems only natural as 'telling stories about past events seems to be a universal human activity, one of the first forms of discourse we learn as children' (Riessman, 1993, p3; Nelson, 1989). This can encourage us to view all types of research as 'forms of life' (Wittgenstein 1953) rather than 'technical exercises governed by an abstract logic of methodological rules' (Mishler 1990, p.419). Narrative inquiry is interdisciplinary (see Langness, 1965; Riessman 1993; Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Blunt 2003; Phillips et al. 2020) viewing narrative inquiry as a creative methodological practice allows new ways of understanding how identity is constructed and produced.

Narrative Fragment

The following narrative fragment is taken directly from field notes carried out by the first author during the study. They take place during CPD (Continuous Professional Development) meetings that teachers attended every Monday after school:

“Today’s session is led by the Head Teacher. It is an opportunity to outline his expectations of how the forthcoming open evening should be conducted.

The head teacher enters the room and then raises his hand. Even though I have now experienced this on several occasions, I still feel uncomfortable with this school rule. The teachers around me shift uneasily. I sense that they are sharing my discomfort.

As silence falls the Head Teacher begins to talk about the importance of the open evening which is happening the following week. He is at pains to stress that this is now a ‘new’ school and teachers should talk as if it is. He shares concerns that the school needs to attract not only as many students as possible but also ‘quality’ students. I make a note to consider the implications of his ‘quality’ as well as quantity approach. When asked by parents about the school the collective line is that Longton Academy Seachurch is a new school, not yet rated by Ofsted, and that teaching and learning is improving every week. It is important, he stresses, to make sure that the new name should be used at all times and anyone referring to it by the old name of Seachurch School should be corrected. He recalls the following story to reinforce his point:

‘The other day I was talking to one of the student’s grandfather’s about how the school has changed. I explained that it was important that everyone used the new name and no longer called it Seachurch School. He replied, ‘well, we all still call it ‘top school’ here’. I said that it should be called Longton Academy Seachurch as it is now part of the Longton Academy Trust. This is what I am expecting you to do and especially next Thursday.’”

The head teacher’s desire to erase the history of the school as he recounts ‘correcting’ the grandfather who uses the name the school is referred to by generations of families who have attended, gives an insight into the erasure of local history and perhaps, in a way, a lack of confidence that this school must in every way be rebranded as ‘new’. Attuning to ‘local ways of knowing’, building on local histories and identity-focused pedagogy can all be ways of reimagining how this school could be ‘turned around’.

Implications for Practice

Understanding the importance of place and identity is essential in the development of designing a curriculum in which students are seen and heard, as well as, providing students with the tools to understand geographical concepts and ideas. In order to move this chapter forward from research to practice, below is a table of ideas that geography practitioners can use to support them in developing their curriculums in their own schools, to reflect the ‘local

ways of knowing' advocated. This is particularly pertinent to the KS3 curriculum as there is more breadth to include local examples and contexts. It is important to note that all curriculums are in constant flux and change and therefore no curriculum is ever 'finished'. We suggest making changes over time to enable students to feel 'seen' within their lessons is a much more powerful approach.

Key Question/Aim	Content	Learning Activities
Migration Stories (Y7)	A unit of work based on Migration, UK Geographies or Population Dynamics	• Asking students who/what/where/when/why questions (see Iram Sammar: www.salaamgeographia.com) • Asking students to interview local people about their own migration stories (link to Human Geography fieldwork) • Engaging students with creative writing practices about migration (sensory writing: smell/touch/sight/taste/sound)
Climatic and Tectonic Hazards (KS3, KS4)	Teaching challenging theories and models	• Developing a model of difficult concepts that relate to students own lived experiences e.g. Atmospheric Circulation Model, relating low pressure to boiling a kettle
Seating Plans	Research has suggested that moving seating plans from rows to tables invites more relationality in the teacher-student relationship in which the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning. Through the use of tables, the classroom becomes a less bounded space, reducing hierarchy (Martin and Pirbhai-Illich 2019)	• Changing seating plans from rows to tables

Oracy and Responsive Teaching	**Oracy:** Ability for students to speak to each other in lessons **Responsive Teaching:** Adapting to a situation that may arise in the lesson and making sure all students are able to access lesson content	● Every lesson provides the opportunity for students to talk to each other and share ideas ● Responsive teaching in every lesson could look like: giving students the freedom to discuss topics outside the lesson content, reteaching content to students who need more support, enabling discussions about current affairs and the world to develop students to be global citizens

Conclusion

Through a detailed examination of the notions of place, space and landscape, this chapter has argued that these concepts can give us a framework to understand the context in which educational experience exists. We argue that the current performative culture in education in England, influenced by neoliberal values (Clarke et al, 2021), creates a discourse of individualism and an erasure of local identity. Attending 'local ways of knowing' (Walker, 2019) both in terms of connecting to communities and understanding the personal geographies of both students and teachers affords the opportunity to re-imagine educational futures. Where currently we see the constant judgement of schools and the way of 'improving' them as an erasure of all that has been before - we argue for privileging identity.

By moving towards an identity-focused approach to education, not only are connections created between school and community to reimagine place, but identity work also enables a re-imagining of curriculum and pedagogy. Through an understanding of the personal geographies of students within school communities, curricula can be powerful sites of change in which students see their lived experiences as connected and influencing their learning. Beyond this, curriculum work becomes an ever-changing project as changes are made in response to a community's past, present and future. In this sense, we ground our experience in the spatial and the temporal - constantly mindful that our 'stories' do not erase what has

come before them but work to harmonise local histories and imagined futures. Stories, therefore, are not static, but in flux - they are always 'stories-so-far' (Massey, 2005).

Further Reading

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Suggested Resources

1. Salaam Geographia: https://salaamgeographia.com
2. Decolonising Geography: https://decolonisegeography.com
3. Royal Geographical Society: https://www.rgs.org/research/higher-education-resources/edi-decolonising/#:~:text=The%20Decolonising%20the%20curriculum%20health,a%20process%20of%20continuous%20improvement (see reading suggestions on local and indigenous knowledges)

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